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Environment Secretary Ron Curry Disappointed With Report of EPA Delay on Important Public Health Issue

(Santa Fe, NM) – Environment Secretary Ron Curry today issued the following statement responding to a report that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has delayed the release of additional information on the Bush Administration’s controversial Mercury Rule until after the election.

“I am very disappointed with this decision by the Bush Administration. This delay can only make us wonder what scientific data the Bush Administration is trying to hide.

In our comments filed with the EPA last spring, the State of New Mexico clearly voiced our problems with the Bush plan for mercury emissions. We aren’t alone either. Officials from the states of California, Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Vermont and Wisconsin agree with us that the Bush proposals will fail to protect people – particularly children and pregnant women – from the grave dangers posed by mercury.

The New Mexico Department of Health estimates that 30,000 women of childbearing age in New Mexico have elevated levels of mercury in their blood and that 4,000 newborns are at risk for neurologic deficits in New Mexico every year due to mercury exposure. I believe we need to take the strongest action possible to reduce these numbers.

Following this outcry, the EPA announced it would release in September additional modeling information on the expected effects of its proposal. Delaying this release until after the election leaves us all to wonder just what this scientific information will show about the true impacts of the Bush mercury plan.”

EPA’s proposal includes an emissions “cap and trade” scheme that would allow power plants to purchase mercury emissions credits from other plants that reduce emissions below targeted levels, rather than reducing their own mercury emissions. EPA’s proposed trading approach therefore would not address hot spots of mercury contamination created in the vicinity of power plants that elect not to reduce emissions.

This plan is weaker than one proposed under the Clinton Administration. A final mercury rule is expected in March.

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New Mexico has one of the highest levels of mercury emissions from power plants in the western U.S. at over one ton annually. In addition, two thirds of the water bodies in New Mexico have fish advisories due to mercury levels found in fish.

Mercury pollution can have devastating implications for young children, who can suffer permanent neurological damage as a result of exposure, frequently in utero. Mercury is a dangerous neurotoxin proven to cause a variety of developmental neurological abnormalities in babies and young children, including delayed developmental milestones, cerebral palsy, reduced neurological test scores and delays and deficits in learning abilities.

The report of the EPA delay was carried in the October 21 edition of the Inside EPA Newsletter.

For further information contact Jon Goldstein, Communications Director, NMED at (505) 827-0314.

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